

## The Reality of the Sacred in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology of Religion

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### Abstract

Mircea Eliade was a Romanian historian of religion and philosopher from Bucharest. He became influential in religious studies during the 20th century, focusing on the importance of myths and symbols in human experience. Notable works include "The Sacred and the Profane" and "Patterns in Comparative Religion," where he explored personal spiritual experiences and the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Eliade introduced concepts such as hierophanies, which refer to the manifestation of the sacred in everyday life. His scholarship laid the groundwork for comparative religion studies and enriched contemporary discussions on religious theories. His work laid the foundation for comparative religion studies and provided critical insights that inform contemporary discussions of the theories of religion. Scholars have drawn on his concepts to explore themes such as ritual, symbolism, and the human quest for meaning, thereby shaping various theories in the field. Eliade's legacy continues to inform how we study and interpret religions today.

This research aimed to explore Eliade's perspective on the interpretation of sacred knowledge in religion and beyond. Mircea Eliade's "The Reality of the Sacred" is significant for several reasons, including the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the importance of myth and symbols, and the concept of Hierophanies. Overall, "The Reality of the Sacred" is celebrated for its innovative ideas and profound implications for understanding the nature of religious experience, positioning Eliade as one of the most influential figures in the study of religion. While his legacy continues to shape contemporary discussions in the field, it is essential to acknowledge certain aspects that might be lacking. Additionally, some criticisms of his writing merit further exploration.

**Keywords** : Review, Perspective, Interpretation, Sacred.

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## 1. Introduction

The Reality of the Sacred explores the complexity of explaining religion, drawing on perspectives from thinkers such as Max Weber, William James, and Sigmund Freud. Weber argues that explanations should not favour one perspective over others, as religion can simultaneously influence and reflect societal forces. James suggests religion can be a source of healing rather than a symptom of mental disorder. The text proposes that, rather than viewing religion through a purely economic or psychological lens, it can be understood as a natural and central aspect of human existence. This viewpoint aligns with Mircea Eliade, a Romanian-American scholar known for his comparative study of religions, who believed that religion should be understood in its own terms. Eliade's diverse educational background and research across various cultures informed his approach to the "history of religions."

Contemporary scholarship in the study of religion demonstrates that religious phenomena cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical perspective. Classical approaches to religion have developed through several intellectual traditions, including the phenomenology of religion, symbolic anthropology, classical sociological theories of religion, and the theory of the social construction of religion. Each of these traditions offers a different analytical lens for understanding how humans experience, interpret, and institutionalize the sacred within cultural and social contexts. The phenomenological tradition, for instance, attempts to describe religious experience from the perspective of the believer without immediately reducing it to psychological or sociological explanations. Rudolf Otto's concept of the *numinous* highlights the unique quality of sacred experience characterised by the dual feeling of awe and fascination, which he described as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Similarly, Gerardus van der Leeuw emphasized the descriptive analysis of religious phenomena, focusing on the manifestation of sacred power within rituals, symbols, and religious practices (Harding, 2021; Samarina, 2021; Kajfosz, 2025).

In addition to phenomenological and cultural interpretations, classical sociological theories have played an important role in explaining the social dimensions of religion. Émile Durkheim defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that functions to maintain moral solidarity within society. From this perspective, religious practices reinforce collective identity and social cohesion. Max Weber, however, approached religion from the standpoint of interpretive sociology, emphasising the subjective meaning of religious action and its relationship with broader processes of rationalisation and modernity. Expanding these sociological insights, Peter L. Berger introduced the concept of religion as a socially constructed reality. In his theory of the *sacred canopy*, religion is understood as a symbolic universe created through processes of externalisation, objectification, and internalisation, through which human beings construct and maintain meaningful social worlds (Launay, 2022; Griffiths & Korstanje, 2021; Hjelm, 2024; Nugroho & Diputra, 2023).

Mircea Eliade was born on March 9, 1907, in Bucharest to a Romanian army officer. He developed a love for writing and literature early on, publishing his first article at 18. Eliade had a transformative childhood experience involving an otherworldly vision from sunlight filtering through curtains, which influenced his views on spirituality. He studied mystical Platonism and Hindu thought at the University of Bucharest and later in Italy.

In 1928, he travelled to India to study under Surendranath Dasgupta, where he experienced significant personal growth and began exploring the concept of "sacramental" experiences and folk religion. Eliade returned to Romania in 1931 to complete his military service and, at age 26, became famous for his novel "Maitreyi". He also published his doctoral dissertation on Indian mystical theology in 1936 and began teaching at the University of Bucharest. During this period, he interacted with nationalist groups but preferred engaging in intellectual pursuits, avoiding political involvement.

Mircea Eliade's starting points are based on two fundamental axioms regarding the study of religion.

1. Independence of Religion: Eliade firmly believes in the autonomy of religion, asserting that it cannot be reduced to or explained solely as a by-product of other realities such as

psychology, sociology, or economics. He emphasises that a religious phenomenon must be understood within its own context, acknowledging its unique characteristics.

2. Element of the Sacred: He argues that the essence of religion lies in the sacred element, which must be recognised as the core of any religious experience. Eliade contends that religion should be viewed as a constant or independent variable, rather than a dependent one influenced by other aspects of life. This perspective emphasises the need to study religion on its own terms.

Religion has also been widely analysed through cultural and symbolic perspectives. Clifford Geertz conceptualised religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful moods and motivations in human beings by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. In this perspective, religious symbols function as cultural texts that must be interpreted through what Geertz famously termed *thick description*. Through this approach, religious rituals, myths, and cultural artefacts can be interpreted as symbolic systems that mediate meaning between human communities and the sacred (Macfarlane et al., 2021; Chhikara, 2022; Yudhanto & Prayoga, 2025).

Despite the diversity of these classical approaches, contemporary discussions on religion often prioritise sociological, cultural, or historical interpretations, sometimes overlooking the experiential dimension of the sacred itself. While phenomenological scholars such as Otto and van der Leeuw emphasised the centrality of sacred experience, later developments in religious studies increasingly shifted toward structural, sociological, and cultural explanations of religion. As a consequence, the ontological significance of the sacred as a fundamental aspect of human existence has received comparatively less attention in recent theoretical debates.

This study seeks to address this limitation by re-examining Mircea Eliade's phenomenological interpretation of the sacred and its relevance within contemporary theoretical discussions of religion. Unlike many studies that interpret religion primarily through sociological or cultural frameworks, this research highlights Eliade's argument that the sacred represents an autonomous dimension of human experience that cannot be fully reduced to social, psychological, or economic factors. By situating Eliade's ideas within the broader landscape of classical approaches to religious studies, including phenomenology, symbolic anthropology, and sociological theories of religion, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the sacred in shaping religious consciousness and cultural meaning.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research. The data are drawn from Mircea Eliade's major works, particularly *The Reality of the Sacred* and *The Sacred and the Profane*, as well as relevant secondary sources such as scholarly books and journal articles on the phenomenology of religion. Data collection is conducted through document analysis by identifying and categorizing key concepts, including the sacred and the profane, symbols, myths, hierophanies, and sacred time. The data are analyzed using a descriptive-interpretative method to examine Eliade's ideas and engage with scholarly critiques in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the reality of the sacred in religious studies.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the text explores the complexity of understanding religion through various philosophical lenses. It emphasises the perspectives of thinkers like Max Weber, William James, and Mircea Eliade. Weber advocates for a balanced view of religion that acknowledges its dual role in influencing and reflecting society. James sees religion as a potential source of healing rather than a mere psychological condition. Eliade, whose work is central to this analysis, stresses the need to view religion independently, focusing on the sacred as a core element of religious experience.

The interpretation of the sacred in Mircea Eliade's work can also be understood more clearly when situated within broader theoretical traditions in the study of religion. One of the most influential frameworks is the phenomenology of religion, which seeks to understand

religious phenomena from the perspective of lived experience rather than reducing them to sociological or psychological explanations. Rudolf Otto's concept of the *numinous* is particularly relevant in this regard. Otto describes the sacred as an encounter with a mysterious and overwhelming reality characterised by the dual experience of awe and fascination, which he famously termed *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This idea parallels Eliade's argument that the sacred represents a unique dimension of human existence that cannot be fully explained through purely rational or empirical approaches (Samarina, 2021; Harding, 2021; Kajfosz, 2025).

Gerardus van der Leeuw further developed phenomenological approaches to religion by emphasising the descriptive analysis of religious phenomena. Rather than focusing solely on theological doctrines, van der Leeuw examined how sacred power manifests through rituals, symbols, myths, and religious practices. This approach resonates strongly with Eliade's analysis of hierophanies, where the sacred reveals itself through symbolic forms embedded in cultural and natural environments. By examining these symbolic manifestations, both scholars attempt to uncover the underlying structures of religious consciousness and the ways in which humans experience transcendence within the world (Harding, 2021; Samarina, 2021; Lamothe, 2022).

In addition to phenomenological interpretations, Eliade's analysis of myth and symbol can also be interpreted through the lens of symbolic anthropology. Clifford Geertz conceptualised religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. From this perspective, religious symbols function as cultural texts that communicate meaning and shape collective worldviews. Eliade's discussion of sky symbolism, sacred objects, and mythological narratives can therefore be interpreted as symbolic systems that mediate relationships between humans and the sacred. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that such symbolic structures play a central role in maintaining cultural identity and transmitting religious meaning across generations (Macfarlane et al., 2021; Chhikara, 2022; Yudhanto & Prayoga, 2025).

While Eliade emphasises the autonomy of religion and the experiential dimension of the sacred, sociological theories of religion highlight the broader social functions of religious beliefs and practices. Émile Durkheim argued that religion functions as a system of beliefs and rituals that reinforces social cohesion and collective identity. In this perspective, the sacred does not merely represent a transcendent reality but also reflects the symbolic representation of society itself. Max Weber, meanwhile, approached religion through interpretive sociology, analysing how religious ideas influence social action and historical processes such as rationalisation and secularisation. These sociological perspectives demonstrate that religion operates not only as a system of belief but also as a social institution that shapes moral values, authority structures, and cultural norms (Launay, 2022; Watts & Houtman, 2022; Furseth, 2023).

Peter L. Berger's theory of the social construction of religion further expands this discussion by emphasising how religious worlds are constructed and maintained through social processes. Berger proposed that religion functions as a "sacred canopy" that provides a comprehensive framework of meaning for human life. Through processes of externalisation, objectification, and internalisation, religious symbols and narratives become institutionalised and internalised within collective consciousness. In contemporary contexts, this framework has been widely used to analyse religious moderation, social identity formation, and patterns of religious behaviour within diverse societies. These perspectives illustrate that religious meaning is not only experienced individually but is also shaped through social interaction, cultural narratives, and institutional structures (Hjelm, 2024; Nugroho & Diputra, 2023; Afriyanto et al., 2024; Albustomi & Qomaruzzaman, 2024).

The comparison of these theoretical perspectives highlights both the strengths and limitations of Eliade's approach. Phenomenological interpretations emphasise the experiential and existential dimension of the sacred, whereas symbolic anthropology focuses on the cultural interpretation of religious symbols. Sociological theories, in contrast, emphasise the social functions and historical transformations of religion, while Berger's theory highlights the processes through which religious realities are socially constructed. Contemporary scholars

have also noted that classical theories of religion often emerged within European intellectual contexts and may not fully capture the diversity of religious expressions across cultures. Nevertheless, integrating these perspectives provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how the sacred operates simultaneously as an experiential reality, a symbolic system, and a socially constructed world of meaning (Launay, 2022; Kajfosz, 2025; Rahmat et al., 2025)

Eliade's concept is further illustrated through his distinction between the sacred and the profane, suggesting that the sacred infuses life with meaning and connects individuals to the divine. He argues that symbols and myths are essential for articulating the sacred, as they capture its essence in ways that resonate with human experience. His exploration of sky symbolism highlights the transcendence embodied by sky gods in archaic religions, reflecting humanity's deep connection to the cosmos. Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of understanding religion on its own terms, emphasising its central role in human existence.

Various scholars have criticised Mircea Eliade's approach to the study of religion. His emphasis on the autonomy of religion may oversimplify its intersection with social, political, and economic factors. By asserting that religion should be understood in isolation, critics contend that Eliade downplays the interplay between religious phenomena and broader societal influences.

Moreover, Eliade's conceptual distinction between the sacred and the profane has been challenged for potentially romanticising archaic societies while neglecting the complexities of contemporary religious expressions. Critics suggest that Eliade's focus on symbols and myths, while valuable, may overlook the lived experiences of individuals in modern contexts, which are multi-faceted and dynamic.

Lastly, some scholars believe that Eliade's interpretations can be reified, limiting the understanding of religion as a fluid and evolving practice. This critique indicates a need for a more nuanced approach that considers both the unique qualities of religious phenomena and their connections to historical and cultural contexts.

### **Eliade's Concept of Religion: The Sacred and the Profane**

In "The Sacred and the Profane," Eliade presents a compelling vision of religion that hinges on the crucial distinction between the sacred and the profane. He urges us to transcend the confines of modern civilisation and immerse ourselves in the world of archaic societies, where existence is understood as operating on two distinct realms. The profane embodies the mundane and chaotic elements of daily life, full of fleeting moments that lack significance. In stark contrast, the sacred represents the extraordinary and the eternal—a realm that infuses life with meaning and order, linking us to the divine, our ancestors, and heroic figures.

Eliade's insight reveals that religion is rooted in this profound separation. To grasp the essence of religious experience, we must recognise the sacred's pivotal role in shaping human understanding and existence. It is in the holy that we find a deeper connection to the world one that transcends the ordinary and leads us toward a more profound appreciation of life's mysteries.

### **Archaic Religion: Symbol and Myth**

In "Symbol and Myth," Eliade delves into the profound challenges of articulating the sacred, a concept that stands in stark contrast to our everyday experiences. Those from archaic societies endeavour to capture the essence of the sacred, yet its extraordinary nature makes direct expression elusive. Eliade brilliantly posits that the language of the sacred is best found in symbols and myths. Symbols act as bridges, linking the sacred to familiar qualities and characteristics that serve as hints toward the supernatural realm. Myths, however, introduce a greater depth; they are intricate narratives woven from symbolic imagery, recounting the tales of gods, ancestors, and the mystical world beyond our own. This rich interplay of symbols and narratives is crucial, as it illuminates the essence of the sacred and invites us to engage with a profound dimension of human experience.

## **Sky Symbolism: Sky Gods and Others**

In the rich tapestry of archaic cultures, one striking theme emerges: the veneration of sky gods. These divine beings, whose essence is intricately tied to the immense expanse of the sky above us, evoke a profound sense of transcendence. The sky serves as a powerful symbol, representing a realm elevated far beyond the ordinary, where the mundane meets the divine.

This belief system emphasises the deep connection between the celestial and the sacred, suggesting that the heavens are not just a backdrop, but a vital expression of higher powers. Sky gods embody the spirituality and wonder inspired by the vastness of the cosmos, underscoring the critical role that celestial elements play in shaping human perceptions of the divine. Through the lens of these beliefs, we gain a richer understanding of how ancient peoples engaged with and interpreted their experiences of the world, weaving a profound narrative that continues to resonate today.

## **Sun and Moon**

In "Sun and Moon," the text explores the symbolic significance of these celestial bodies in various cultures and their representation of duality in life. The sun often symbolises strength, order, and a dominant force, while the moon embodies mystery, fluctuation, and the feminine aspect of existence. The interplay between these two celestial elements reflects broader themes such as creation, renewal, and the balance of opposites. The sun and moon, through their contrasting yet complementary natures, serve as powerful metaphors in mythology and religion, illustrating humanity's relationship with the cosmos and the more profound truths of life. This duality invites contemplation of how these symbols shape our understanding of the sacred and the profane, connecting us to larger existential questions.

## **Water and Stones**

"Water and Stones" explores the relationship between nature, spirituality, and human experience. The text emphasises the contrasting elements of water, often seen as a symbol of life, fluidity, and renewal, and stones, representing permanence, stability, and the unchanging aspects of existence.

The narrative illustrates how these elements influence cultures and religions, with water symbolising purification and rebirth in various spiritual traditions, while stones embody strength and endurance. It delves into the ways humans interact with these natural elements, using them as metaphors for the journey of life, where the transient and the eternal coexist.

Ultimately, the text invites readers to reflect on how these elemental forces shape their understanding of spirituality and existence, encouraging a deeper appreciation for the complexities of nature and human inner life.

## **Other Symbols: Earth and Fertility, Vegetation and Agriculture**

In addition to sky symbolism, archaic religions exhibit a diverse range of symbols that convey deep spiritual meanings. Various elements of nature, such as earth, water, and fire, often hold significant sacred value. For instance, the earth can symbolise fertility and nourishment, while water may represent purification and renewal. Animals are also prominent symbols, embodying traits that connect to the divine or spiritual lessons.

Furthermore, rituals and sacred objects often serve as essential symbols within these belief systems. Rituals act as a bridge between the mundane and the sacred, allowing practitioners to connect with higher powers. Meanwhile, sacred objects, such as altars or religious artefacts, can channel divine presence and evoke spiritual experiences.

Overall, these symbols rooted in the natural world and human experience—help articulate the complexities of the sacred, fostering a deeper understanding and engagement with spirituality in archaic cultures.

## **The Structure and Character of Symbols**

"The Structure and Character of Symbol" explores the role of symbols in expressing the sacred and facilitating communication between the earthly and the divine. Eliade emphasises that symbols are not merely representations but are deeply embedded in a society's cultural and religious contexts. They serve as bridges connecting the ordinary world to the transcendent, allowing individuals to engage with profound spiritual realities.

The structure of symbols is multifaceted, often incorporating layers of meaning that resonate across different dimensions of existence. Eliade notes that symbols can reflect universal experiences while also being shaped by the particular traditions and narratives of specific cultures. This duality underscores the complexity of religious symbols, as they encapsulate both the shared human pursuit of meaning and the unique expressions of particular belief systems.

Ultimately, Eliade argues that understanding symbols is essential for grasping the nature of religious experience. They provide insight into how individuals and communities interact with the sacred, revealing the rich tapestry of beliefs, values, and histories that define a culture's spiritual landscape.

### **History and Sacred Time**

In "History and Sacred Time," Mircea Eliade explores the relationship between religious beliefs and the concepts of time and history within various cultures. He argues that traditional societies perceive time as cyclical rather than linear, viewing sacred events as recurring patterns that connect the present with a primordial past. This cyclical understanding allows people to participate in the sacred through rituals and celebrations that recreate and relive significant historical or mythological events.

Eliade contrasts this with modern secular perspectives, which emphasise linear history and often disregard the sacred dimension of time. He highlights how, in archaic cultures, sacred time is intertwined with the rhythm of life, affecting everything from agriculture to personal milestones. By engaging with sacred time, individuals can transcend mundane existence and experience a deeper connection to the divine and the cosmos.

Ultimately, Eliade advocates for recognising the importance of sacred time in understanding religious practices and beliefs, suggesting that this perspective can enrich our comprehension of human experience and the role of religion in society.

#### **The Revolt Against Archaic Religion: Judaism and Christianity**

In this text, the author examines the shift from archaic religious beliefs to the more abstract and ethical frameworks found in Judaism and Christianity. Unlike the ancient focus on rituals and the sacred elements of nature, these monotheistic religions introduced the concept of a singular, transcendent God deeply concerned with moral behaviour and human justice.

Judaism represents a significant departure from archaic traditions by emphasising covenant, law, and ethical monotheism. The Jewish faith promotes the idea of a relationship between God and humanity, emphasising moral conduct and individual accountability for actions.

Christianity further develops this revolt by prioritising love, grace, and redemption. It introduces the teachings of Jesus Christ, which challenge traditional views of power and religious authority, advocating for compassion and forgiveness over ritualistic observance.

Both religions facilitate a move away from the cyclical nature of archaic beliefs towards a linear understanding of history and salvation. This transformation raises questions about the nature of the sacred, redefining human existence in relation to the divine and promoting values that prioritise ethical living over mere ritualistic practice.

Ultimately, Judaism and Christianity reflect a significant cultural and spiritual evolution, marking a clear shift from the archaic worldview to a more individualistic and moral approach to religion.

### **The Revolt Against All Religion: Modern Historicism**

"The Revolt Against All Religion: Modern Historicism" explores the tension between traditional religious perspectives and the rise of modern historicism, which seeks to interpret

events and ideas in their historical context. This movement emerged in response to the perceived rigidity of established religions, advocating a more fluid and dynamic understanding of human experience and belief systems.

Key thinkers associated with this revolt argue that religious truths are not absolute but are shaped by historical circumstances and cultural evolution. They emphasise the importance of context, suggesting that religious beliefs and practices should be examined as products of their time rather than as timeless truths. This historical approach often critiques the dogmatic aspects of religion, focusing on the social and cultural forces that influence belief systems.

The text argues that this revolt marks a significant shift in humanity's relationship to the sacred, moving away from transcendent authority toward a more secular, human-centred understanding of existence. It highlights the complexities that arise when reconciling historical interpretations with deeply held spiritual beliefs, ultimately leading to a profound reevaluation of what it means to be religious in a modern, pluralistic society.

### **The Return of Archaic Religion**

"The Return of Archaic Religion" explores the resurgence and relevance of ancient religious practices in contemporary society. The text emphasises that, despite its advancements, modernity often leads individuals to seek a deeper meaning and a closer connection to the sacred, akin to that found in archaic religions. It argues that the return to these ancient beliefs offers a profound understanding of existence that resonates with today's spiritual quests.

The author examines how elements such as myth, ritual, and symbolism from archaic religions can enrich modern spiritual experiences. This return to the archaic is seen as a response to the disenchantment of the contemporary world, where conventional religious structures may fail to satisfy the yearning for the sacred. By embracing these timeless practices, individuals can rediscover a sense of belonging and a connection to the transcendent, which has been increasingly marginalised in modern culture.

Overall, the text illustrates the enduring nature of archaic religious elements and their potential for fostering a richer, more meaningful spiritual life in the contemporary context.

### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions**

In conclusion, "The Reality of the Sacred" emphasises the necessity of understanding religion as a multi-faceted phenomenon that transcends reductive explanations rooted in psychology, sociology, or economics. Thinkers such as Max Weber, William James, and Mircea Eliade advocate for an appreciation of religion's autonomy and the essential role of the sacred in human experience. Eliade, in particular, encourages us to look beyond the everyday and recognise the significance of the sacred in shaping cultural narratives and individual lives.

As we explore the landscapes of archaic societies through the lenses of symbol and myth, we begin to see how these ancient practices and beliefs reveal deep-seated human yearnings for connection, meaning, and transcendence. The veneration of sky gods and other sacred symbols underscores how communities make sense of their existence and craft their identities. Ultimately, the text.

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